

Fightback

Struggle, Solidarity, Socialism



Queers and the Capitalist Media: A Fightback pamphlet

A Fightback pamphlet
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**HATERS
GONNA
HATE**

**BUT DON'T
GIVE THEM
A PLATFORM**

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The Queer Avengers join a broader march for marriage rights

LGBT campaigning in Wellington — Interview with Queer Avengers

The following interview is with Kassie Hartendorp and Jason Frick, organisers for Fightback (then 'Workers' Party') and the Queer Avengers.

While this interview does not directly concern the capitalist media, it does provide background on the Queer Avengers, who would later campaign against transphobic and queerphobic media.

The interview was first published on the Fightback website in August 2011.

Fightback: What was Queer the Night?

KH: Queer the Night was a march organised in response to the day-to-day violence that members of the queer community face while in the streets. The fear of verbal insults and physical attacks is something queers constantly carry with them everywhere.

JF: The streets are especially dangerous places for queers. Twice as much near bars at night which are highly sexualised areas where concepts of 'masculinity' need to be protected. They are often impossible to pass without having an insult hurled your way if you're visibly gay. It was also becoming normalised in Wellington to have regular queer bashings. Within our own friend networks it was becoming roughly one every other month.

KH: The purpose of the march was to call out the queer community for its general silence towards the pervasive homophobic and transphobic street culture. We wanted people to realise that "enough is enough" and to begin to think about how to collectively organise beyond the march itself and to actually fight our continued oppression.

JF: Homophobic and transphobic violence is something experienced by queer community as a whole, but the responses to it are generally acted upon at an individual level. We wanted to break that atomisation by having a

visible, militant and proud march through the centre of town and opening up a place where queers can come together and talk about our social oppression.

KH: What we needed was a celebration, a big bang to break the silence. We needed a powerful event which could break through the general apathy towards collective action. We needed an event which would empower people to take ownership of the queer community.

Fightback: How did the march itself go?

JF and KH: Overwhelming success.

KH: The energy was amazing. For many of us it was the most militant march we've been on. There was a good turnout, of about 400 people. The militancy, size and feel were much greater than the numbers. I've been on bigger marches that weren't nearly as powerful.

There were four official guest speakers; all were received well by the crowd. It was a very emotional and raw event. People were crying. Actually making the streets a queer space was a very powerful experience for people.

JF: For most young queers their first "mass queer space" is a nightclub. I went to my first gay nightclub at 17 and emotionally I was left reeling for days after the experience.

It was the first time I ever really understood myself and my sexuality and realised I wasn't alone. For a lot of the Schools Out youth Kassie and I work closely with, it was their first mass queer experience. It led to some very personal and passionate speeches during the open-mic session. For older queers, I think re-claiming a space that they usually associate with fear opened up many emotional outlets.

KH: It was a very politicising event, very successful in terms of empowering people to take ownership and action. For socialists it is important for us to fight the structural battle against queer oppression rather than fighting for a privileged position for any faction of queers vis-à-vis another, such as gays or lesbians over trans people or bisexuals. That means using queer (different) to challenge the structural concept of 'normal,' rather than just saying that gays or lesbians are 'normal' in the same way as heterosexuals are, which naturally infers another set of 'outsiders.' And in that sense we were also quite successful in building a pretty inclusive event. Two of the four speakers either were intersex or trans and the other two were gay. We also had a good gender balance between the voices. However, we found it difficult to getting into Takat pui networks which is a problem we have to work out going forward. All the speakers had a good class understanding too which kept the content relevant.

JF: In some ways Queer the Night was actually too successful an event! There's a running joke going on now about the queer youth we work with in Schools Out getting ahead of us and revolting. Just one example of this, the whole situation where the youth called-up St Pats [Catholic secondary boys' school] on their discriminatory ball policy was an outcome of the immediate empowerment and ownership that came out of Queer the Night. Fortunately that empowerment was rather wide-spread and flowed into the public meeting the next week where 87 people, all active and with something to say met to plan what comes next.

Fightback: Where has the focus/energy gone now?

KH: We made it clear on the night, that no

matter how powerful people felt on the march, the next morning everything would still be the same. We made sure to organise and plan for the longer-term development of a political organisation the likes of which hasn't been seen since the Gay Task Force in 86.

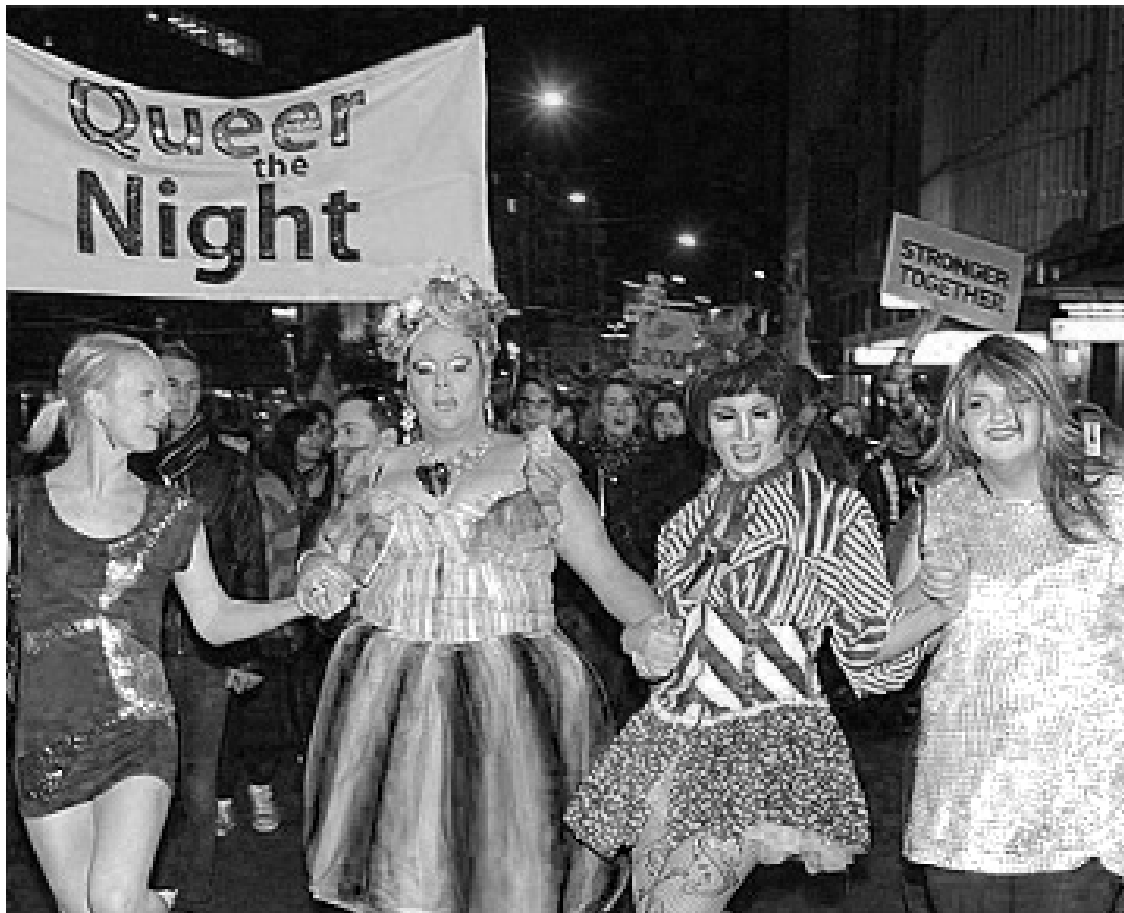
JF and KH: We've had a series of at least 10 weekly public meetings now which on the 8th of July, a day before the 25th anniversary of the homosexual law reform bill being passed, culminated in the Queer Avengers being formed.

JF: We've got our website online now at thequeeravengers.org.nz [note: website now defunct]. Largely we're operating on the same premise as Queer the Night, that is, that everyone has the right to express and explore their queerness without barriers—whether they be economic, religious or legal in nature. However, we are also a very democratic group and so naturally the Queer Avengers, which has a much greater community involvement, has become far more than Queer the Night ever was. We're still working on our programme, but we've pretty much got our first campaign worked out which we will be launching with a demonstration on Thursday the 6th of October.

KH: We've decided that we are a political action group dedicated to elimination all social forms of homophobia and transphobia. Under this lofty goal we have a series of 3 main campaigns which we intend to focus on, but we also want to have the flexibility to react to new issues which may arise.

Our three campaign areas are looking to be:

1) A queer youth campaign. Queer youth tend to be the most isolated populations in our community with the highest levels of loneliness, depression and suicidality. Most queer youth manage to make some connections with the community and can ward off that loneliness, however Auckland University's 2007 Youth Report note that 39% seriously consider suicide as an option with 20% actually making an attempt, compared to 4% for straight youth. The statistics for trans youth are even worse.



GayNZ.com - Drag queens march in first Queer the Night, 2011

However, we know those statistics drop significantly when they have safe, queer spaces where they can meet each other and build friendships with other queers. Amongst other things we demand that the Ministry of Education take its legal obligation to make schools safe places by ensuring the resources are made available to the queer community to develop Queer-Straight Alliances in all schools throughout the country.

2) Our second campaign is going to be around supporting the older queer population. The institutions for older queers are just not up to the task. Some of the worst places in society to be queer either as a worker or as a resident is in rest-homes.

3) Our third campaign will be focused on gender and the discrimination that intersex, trans and genderqueer people face. We're looking at number of options for getting it publicised that gender doesn't necessarily follow from sex and that gender is also not just a binary.

The Spark/Ed Note: The Queer Avengers meets every Thursday at 7:00pm in Wellington at Anvil House, 138-140 Wakefield St. All meetings are public and new voices are always encouraged.

The views expressed in this interview are personal and do not necessarily represent the established views of each of the organisations.

#transphobictampons:

It's Not Offensive, It's Oppressive

An article by Kassie Hartendorp, member of Fightback and The Queer Avengers.

First published on the Fightback website in January 2012.

At the end of 2011, an advertisement for Libra tampons was pulled from air after members from the queer community called out the company for its transphobia. Many argued that the company was sending a strong message to those who did not identify as the gender they were assigned at birth, that they were not as 'authentic' as their biological counterparts.

The issue was framed as being problematic for only a small amount of 'oversensitive' members of the trans community but the advertisement can be linked back to the way that negative images work to oppress many on the gender and sexuality spectrum. Featured on Australian and NZ television, as well as the Libra website and Youtube, the advertisement featured two women applying their make-up in a bathroom at a club. One appears to be a cis-woman[1] and the other appears to be a drag queen. The two embark on a competition to see who the 'real woman' is by both putting on mascara, lip gloss and adjusting their breasts. The contest is 'won' when the cis-woman pulls out her Libra tampon causing the drag queen to storm off defeated, due to her apparent biological deficiency – the fact that she cannot menstruate like her cis counterpart.

Comments flowed in on the Libra Facebook page and various news, blog and social networking sites accusing Libra of being, at best ignorant, at worst, blatantly transphobic and misogynist. Those who spoke out were labelled as being 'too sensitive' and disregarded the issue as 'political correctness gone wild.' The main discourse being used, or ways of talking about the advertisement were framed around the idea of 'personal offence.' Some gender variant people made the argument that they were not offended, which implied that the whole issue was moot. The drag queen appearing in the advertisement made the public announcement that she saw no need to apologise and saw the problem as coming from a 'small portion of the trans community' who have 'chosen to view the ad as a personal attack.'

Frames from transphobic Libra ad



Aside from the fact that most gender variant people do not 'choose' to feel attacked by advertisements that use their often difficult lives as the butt of a joke by a multimillion dollar corporation, the entire framing of the discussion should be readjusted. Advertisements such as this one should be seen as having an oppressive effect, rather than an offensive one.

Labelling a comment, slur or stereotype as offensive, lowers the problem to that of the individual rather than identifying it as a structural problem. Someone could be offended by loud music or bright coloured clothing. An old co-worker of mine felt personally offended every time she saw someone wearing pyjama pants tucked into Uggs boots to a shopping mall. At the same time, someone can be offended by a woman who strongly speaks out in a male-dominated environment, or a queer couple holding hands down the street. A corporation could be offended when a marginalised community protests against their transphobic advertisement – a CEO could feel personally attacked in much the same way as those being degraded or insulted by their media campaign. The point here, is that while offence is an important component in this debate, it cannot be the only way in which we describe and discuss how media and oppression works. As one blogger puts it: "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can mobilize an entire society in violent hate against me." Depicting a gender variant person as being 'less woman' than a cisgendered woman due to the fact she does not menstruate is oppressive. Reinforcing a gender binary that assumes and expects that you fit into one gender category or the other is oppressive. Profiting off the fear of someone not being able to fit into one of these gender categories is oppressive. These are not personal attacks on individual members of the trans community; they are the product of an oppressive system. Issues of oppression need to be understood at a material basis – that is, not just social phenomena that happen to random individuals, which only make sense through a lens of personal experience. Transgender people are the subjects of discrimination when it comes to basic rights such as employment, housing and medical care,

as well as being threatened by verbal and physical harassment in their daily lives. This oppression is, at its very core, structural as it is reproduced within institutions such as workplaces, hospitals, schools and governmental agencies.

While, these oppressive forces can be clearly felt on a personal basis, the way of articulating the problem and arming against its destructive effects must be done on a wider level that takes our economic and social system into account.

Capitalism is often thought of as just an economic system but it should also be understood as a social relation. How we relate to each other as individuals, groups and identities is shaped by capitalist logic. These social relations, such as the gender binary, are reproduced through the capitalist media.

While gains have most certainly been made, trans people are often stigmatised, insulted and ridiculed within the mainstream media.

The Libra advertisement is just another message that reinforces the oppressive idea that gender variant people are second class citizens. If you ask any transgender person, they will feel the very real effects of this at some point in their lives, if not on a daily basis. Furthermore, it cannot be forgotten that a company is profiting off these very messages because of an advertising industry that uses fear and division as a tool to sell products. Many members of the queer community failed to recognise the oppressive nature of the message the advertisement sent. If we are going to combat queer oppression that has negative effects on both same-sex attracted people and the gender variant population, there needs to be a recognition that an attack on the trans community is an attack on us all. We need to shift away from the mode of thinking that blames the individual for taking a 'personal offence' at an oppressive act.

An advertisement may seem small, but it is one building block of many that have, over history, built a mighty wall of structural oppression. Unfortunately that one brick isn't going to cause the whole wall to crumble, but if we can together get a foothold, and find the right tools to start chiselling away at those ruptures, then maybe we can tear it down and build a world in which no-one is treated as second class.

[1] Cisgendered or cis-woman: Identifying as the gender assigned at birth. Equivalent term to "trans," identifying differently to the gender assigned at birth.



The Queer Avengers Later 'glitterbombed' Germaine Greer, known for her transphobia

On Rosemary McLeod: Media profit from bigotry

In February 2012, the Dominion Post (owned by Fairfax Media) printed a horrifically transphobic work by columnist Rosemary McLeod, belligerently misgendering a trans man who had recently given birth (we have not reprinted or linked McLeod's piece because, unlike Fairfax Media, we don't intend to give a platform for bigotry).

The Queer Avengers protested outside Fairfax Media headquarters, and occupied the lobby, until we were given a right to speak to management, and negotiate a right of response.

The following piece was written by Ian Anderson and Rosie-Jimson Healey, and printed by the Dominion Post. Interestingly the Dominion Post'sir only major edit was to change the headline from 'Media profit from bigotry' to the vaguer and more passive 'Underlying attitude mocks transgender people':

EGO-TRIP: compound noun, informal. An activity done in order to increase one's sense of self-importance.

One would think that giving birth is an activity unlikely to be deposited scathingly in the ego-trip category.

Perhaps bringing a new life into the world does increase one's sense of self-importance; it is an astonishing example of the power of the human body when a perfect tiny human emerges from a uterus that has casually grown to 500 times its usual size.

Not to mention the presentation of a helpless, beetroot-coloured miniature human being. Even so, we don't imagine many would link the term "ego-trip" to this particular moment in most parents' lives.

However, this was the case in Rosemary McLeod's piece that bore the headline Why I feel sorry for the children of ego-trippers (February 23). An innocent enough title, certainly not one that would sound immediate alarm bells in the reproductive rights, hate speech and eugenics departments. Unfortunately, the "ego-trippers" in question were trans-parents, and alarm bells did ring, loud and clear.

Deriding several trans man fathers who had given birth, McLeod singled out American Thomas Beatie, calling him an "apparent man", before crudely demolishing his identification and legal status as male, entirely because he did not choose to have a "surgically created penis thingy".

The problem here is not the piece itself, nor the individual author, but the underlying attitudes that mock and molest people's rights to say and be who they are, and safely live their lives.

These are attitudes that transgender people and their families and friends live with when they go to work, school, do their grocery shopping, go to school interviews, or pick up a paper.

We're sure we've come a long way from the old belief that a penis makes a man, and a womb a woman. We think it's fair to say that if a woman had a hysterectomy, or a man suffered the loss of his genitalia, we would not revert to the opposite pronouns. In fact, we probably wouldn't know.

Then there's the age-old argument: "It's the kids I worry about." Don't we all. What with environmental concerns, child poverty, the economy, bullying in schools, and most heartbreakingly, New Zealand's high youth suicide rates, especially among gay, lesbian and gender diverse students, there's plenty to worry about.

An article published in The Dominion Post on the same day, Gender non-conformity linked to abuse, highlights a recent US study. This found something the trans and gender variant community know perfectly well: children who do not conform to gender norms are targeted for abuse, which can lead to post-traumatic stress disorder.

Although there are no statistics available for trans kids in New Zealand, 20 per cent of lesbian, gay and bisexual kids attempt suicide

– compared with 4 per cent of straight ones. Spokespeople for The Dominion Post state the article was McLeod's "opinion", and that refusing the article would violate "the principle of free expression". However, papers decide what to print, and what not to print. Editors decide what content to let through, whether on the basis of personal opinion – or what will get website traffic and advertising dollars.

This continues a pattern of media profit-ing from bigotry. Whether it's Paul Holmes demonising Maori as "bludgers", McLeod at-tacking sex-workers, or in this case attacking trans parents, the press provides a platform where bigotry is acceptable.

This is not confined to the news media; see Libra's recent transphobic ad campaign, which has since been pulled.

In response to the community outcry incited by this media trend, the Queer Avengers called a rally outside Fairfax headquarters in Wellington to protest against the publication of McLeod's piece. About 60 people showed with less than 24 hours' notice.

The queer and trans community have sent a clear message: we will not tolerate the pro-motion of our abuse in the media, we won't suffer in silence, and we're not fighting alone. Wellingtonians are lucky to have access to committed trans-friendly groups:

Agender NZ provides support and advocacy throughout New Zealand. Agender.org.nz Tranzform is a Wellington-based support group for trans/gender-variant youth. Tranzform.org.nz



BOYCOTT BOYCOTT BOYCOTT LA COMAY LA COMAY LA COMAY

#boicotlacomay:

No profit from homophobia and racism

In early January 2013, Puerto Rican chat show SuperXclusivo (featuring puppet character La Comay) was cancelled after a sustained boycott campaign.

Fightback writer Ian Anderson interviews Carlos Rivera, who co-founded the Facebook group and played a leading role in the campaign.

First published on the Fightback website in January 2013.

Fightback: What were the initial problems with La Comay, and SuperXclusivo, that triggered this campaign?

CR: For more than a decade, the show had had issues with hate speech and hate “humour”. In 2010 this came to head with extreme homophobic comments. The TV station was forced by a huge LGBTT campaign to create a public promise to change. A few months later the format re-emerged.

It also had moved from being a celebrity gossip and crime sensationalism show and into politics – supporting right wing politicians, draconian law-and-order “solutions to crime” and so on. The latest of this effort had been the unsuccessful attempt to eliminate bail rights earlier in 2012. When we won that referendum, we celebrated the fact we won not against the political establishment, but against La Comay. It was there I was drawn to the issue in a definitive manner.

The immediate trigger was the disappearance of a young man in the middle of a robbery. This kidnapping and eventual murder generated incredible social media attention and sympathy.

Then the show made hateful comments towards the victim, to the extreme of implying he had it coming for frequenting a red light district. The sympathy for the victim was high, so the comments fell on sensitive ears.

Fightback: Who benefits from this bigotry? What are the consequences?

CR: Basically the right wing and conservative hate mongers – and the colonialist project benefit.

The fundamental consequence was the agenda being set from the right and from the

reactionary perspective – even on unpopular issues. For example, the majority of Puerto Ricans are opposed to the death penalty, and the colonial constitution prohibits it. Yet this show made it seem as it was an open question, and had an effect of putting the anti-death penalty forces in the defensive. The loss of this voice has already had an explosive effect – a visible one – in how the debates happen at the street level. There is a sense that the silent majority is progressive – which it is – but there was not this sense before.

Fightback: Your “Boicot a La Comay” Facebook page has over 75,000 likes, can you talk about this growth?

CR: About half of it happened in the first 24 hours. It was entirely grassroots.

Fightback: What kind of impact has the campaign had on the company?

CR: They tried to reign in the show – changing it to a pre-recorded format. This created the conditions for the cancellation – Kobbo Santarrosa, the puppeteer found this unacceptable. It proved our theory correct: the show existed due to inertia – not even the management really liked it. They did like the money. So when we attacked the money, the incentive to continue was removed.

Fightback: Is this campaign an attack on “free speech”?

CR: No. Our first slogan was “Boycott without censorship”. This is why even if some members were calling for censorship – for example, pressuring the Federal Communications Commission to cancel the license – we never made those official. We knew we were treading dangerous waters in terms of speech.

Our idea was never to silence speech, but to de-fund speech. The two are not the same.

Fightback: What social forces have been drawn into the campaign?
All of them. But a salient fact is that the overwhelming majority of likes in Facebook are from women, at a ~58% vs ~42% men. This is significant, in part, because people considered SuperXclusivo to be a “women’s show”.

Fightback: Much of the coverage, and social media campaigning, has been Spanish-language. How do you think the English-language coverage has compared with this?

CR: It is natural that as local issue that would be the case, but one of the salient facts – except for brief notes in the New York Times – is that English coverage was Latino-oriented. It never broke to other news outlets. This speaks clearly of the colonial relationship.

Fightback: What is the relationship, and what are the differences, between US and Puerto Rican networks?

CR: Basically out of the three major TV channels, 2 are affiliates of Univision and Telemundo – the leading Spanish-language networks in the USA. WAPA-TV is “independent” but owned by a US private equity firm – the same that owns other “niche” channels like the Gospel and Christian Music Television.

Fightback: As someone currently living in New York, how have you found working on a campaign against a show produced in Puerto Rico?

CR: It made me dependent on the membership for the information – it also made the media have to work this.

Fightback: How did the simultaneous vigil in New York and Puerto Rico go?

CR: Very well, I think our victory is in part due to the pressures it generated on advertisers and the owners of the channel.

In NYC we were able to directly confront employees for the corporation with our demands.

Fightback: How do you see the relationship

between online and street organising?

CR: I think it is a false dichotomy – and the insistence on this dichotomy is a serious strategic and tactical problem for any political movement. Those who organized the Facebook page that triggered the Arab Spring continue to lead their online communities, but are one of the many voices on the street. This shows they are part of continuum, rather than a dichotomy. Certainly there are differences, but these are minor and microcosmic. At the macro level, they are part of the same general movement, and should be seen as such. Today, street organizing without an online presence is doomed, and vice versa. It is how the world is.

Fightback: This is a broad campaign around a single demand. From a socialist perspective, what can be achieved by participating?

CR: In particular, we have achieved credibility. This is a mass line issue in a classic sense. The absence of a real socialist force means the gain is limited, but the idea that socialists can contribute to reforms without having to compromise their strategic message is proven – hopefully the lesson will not be lost to socialists in PR.

Fightback: What’s next?

CR: We will see what the members want. But we already have had minor victories in other issues.

Fightback: How can socialists in Aotearoa support this struggle, and struggles like it?

CR: Fundamentally, raising the issue of the colonial relationship between the USA and Puerto Rico. The forces against colonialism in Puerto Rico are a minority, but this is due in part to the colonial condition in itself. International awareness of this issue will have solid impact. After all, the independence forces in East Timor, for example, were a minority, until international awareness of the struggle fuelled them. Of course, Puerto Rico has its own complexities, but the international silence on this question tends to isolate and demoralize the pro-independence forces. Some, for example, have become anti-annexation rather than anti-colonial – with serious consequences to the struggle for self-determination.

"It's like they bought a present for the person they wish you were" :

ABC Family's *Huge* and the limits of marketable queerness



chubstr – Harvey Guillen, star of ABC Family's *Huge*

Essay by Ian Anderson.

Originally written for a course on Media, Gender and Sexuality at Victoria University of Wellington, in June 2012.

ABC Family show *Huge* disrupts, and reinforces norms of gender and sexuality on network television. The basis for this show was laid through the sale and diversification of the Family Channel, leading to experimentation with new audiences. The choice to focus on a largely plus-size cast, in a romantically charged teen drama, was a commercially risky endeavour. Textual analysis in the essay will focus particularly on the character of Alistair Delgado,[1] who is interpellated on the terms of network television as "the gay character," but whose negotiation with the production of sexuality and gender identity complexifies this type. The cancellation of this show, and cutting short of Alistair's story, reflects the limitations of the profit model as a basis for queer expression.

Analysis will place the show in an economic context at one level, and an interpellative context at another. Butler acknowledged in the 10th anniversary edition of *Gender Trouble* that gender transgression is limited to its acquisition of exchange value (Butler, 1999; cited in Brady, 2011). This essay will put *Huge* in historical/economic context as a network TV show, produced through competition for new markets. Textual analysis will then focus on the portrayal of gender and sexuality in the show, particularly "gay character" Alistair. Alexander Doty and Ben Gove (1997) criticise the simplification to 'positive' and 'negative' depictions of LGBT characters, because identification is more complex (ibid). This essay will attempt instead to place characters in the context of interpellation; the calling-into-being of a subject, (Althusser, 1970) particularly a gendered sexual subject, (Butler, 1997) in this case by network television.

Queerness in *Huge* is subject to the political economy of network television. ABC Family, network for *Huge*, was originally known as the Family Channel (Owen, 2006). The Family Channel was an arm of Pat Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network, one of America's 200 largest charities, which has around 95% donor dependency (Levin, 2001; Barrett, 2011). This channel attracted largely older audiences less sought by advertisers – only a third of homes watching the channel had children (Levin, 2001). Pat Robertson sold the channel to Fox, who sought to draw in younger viewers (ibid). Finally, with Disney taking over, the channel rebranded as "ABC Family: a new kind of family," seeking younger audiences and publicly distancing itself from Robertson's ultra-conservative rhetoric (Gary, 2001; Goodstein, 2005).

The move towards a commercial model, and quest for new audiences, formed the basis for *Huge*. Advertising is central to the political economy of mass media, (Gill, 2007) and to get advertising dollars networks must win audiences. ABC Family brought out a wide range of original programming for 'millennial/millennial' audiences (Owen, 2006). Producer Robin Schiff helped arrange a collaboration between student Savannah Dooley and her mother Winnie Holzman[2] on a teen drama set at a fat camp (Strouse, 2012). Dooley stated that she was "frustrated by the lack of body diversity on TV" and "eager to do something new and interesting" (YPulse, 2010). The showrunners found that casting the show was a challenge, because of the limitations Hollywood places on actors' bodies (Strouse, 2012). In an interview just before the premiere, lead actress Nikki Blonsky speculated that it may be the first full plus-size cast in the history of TV (Keveney, 2010).

By its premise the show was disrupting previous bodily norms on network television.

The advantages of the network's liberalisation were double-edged. As *Family* gained new audiences with a series of hit shows, the ratings threshold increased - creating a more competitive environment for shows like *Huge* (Hitflix Staff, 2010). With ratings averaging 1.9 million, the show was cancelled despite positive critical and fan reception (ibid). Increased competition both opened room for the show as an experiment in market expansion, and closed it down when the experiment failed.

The show did find a strong online following for its critical politics of fat, sexuality and gender. Dooley has stated that some of her inspiration was drawn from fat-positive blogs. In turn, Dooley was interviewed about the show on a number of blogs, and *Fatshionista* ran a series of largely favourable recaps (Dodai, 2012; YPulse, 2010; McNutt, 2010; Kinsel, 2010a). Bloggers have argued the show's body politics break from the usual limitations of network television (Maia, 2010).

The show deliberately disrupts and negotiates norms of gender and sexuality. An ABC press release describes lead character Will as "a menace to some and revolutionary to others," (ABC, 2010) as she consistently challenges the whole concept of a fat camp and the normative ideals imposed on women's bodies. In the opening scene she performs a strip-tease, disrupting normative media depictions of fat women as passive and asexual (Johnston, 2006). Will describes herself as an "angry feminist," and makes a mural on her bunk-room wall saying "screw body fascism." She is mistaken within the text for a lesbian due to her unconventional gender presentation; in interviews, showrunner Savannah Dooley has contrasted this with her own experience that people incorrectly assume she is straight because her presentation is more 'femmy' (Voss, 2010). Dooley has stated that "everything I write is queer" (Steward, 2010). Rather than interrogating the authenticity of this queerness, an arguably self-defeating endeavour, (Brady, 2011) this essay will outline how the show negotiates norms.

Alistair Delgado, a character understood as gay, has particularly complex negotiation



with interpellations of sexuality and gender. Arguably he is not the only LGBTIQ character: one character identifies as “asexual,” and some audiences have read Will’s platonic girlfriend as having a crush on her (Kinsel, 2010c). However, Alistair is the character most interpellated as non-hetero. A secondary character, Alistair has been referred to by some cast members and media commentators as “the gay character” (McNutt, 2010). Alistair never actually ‘comes out’ or identifies as gay, but is still hailed as such. Many have noted the heavy expectations placed on the performance of coming out as gay (Brady, 2011). It could be argued that Alistair never has a coming out scene precisely because he remains in the closet; indeed, in the finale, he must perform heterosexuality for his parents. However, his interactions with his peers are more complicated than that, reflecting tensions around interpellation and assumption. Characters within the show refer to him as “that gay kid,” making sense of his effeminacy and (perhaps) his crush on jock character Trent by hailing him as gay. When somebody finally asks if he is gay, Alistair responds, “I don’t really think of it like that. I don’t like labels.” This turns the coming out narrative on its head, because rather than having to tell people he’s gay, Alistair has to explain that it’s more complicated. Writer Savannah Dooley has said that she intended to explore the “gray areas” of sexuality: “I get why [Alistair’s crush on Trent] might leave the impression Alistair is gay despite his words ‘I don’t think of it like that,’ because viewers are used to seeing sexuality as fixed, straight or gay, nothing in between... I’m interested in exploring the gray areas, especially in a teen show where the characters are still figuring out how to label themselves and what they even want.” (McNutt, 2010)

Alistair’s body does not conform to media ideals of gay masculinity, in terms of size or colour. Rosalind Gill (2007) notes that media often signifies gay masculinity not through sexual preference, but through presentation: “Gay men are signified primarily through stylish and attractive appearance and patterns of looking. Indeed, it often seems as if gay masculinity is primarily a style identity, not a sexual one” (ibid).

While he is certainly camp, Alistair does not fit conventional network standards of attractive presentation – on top of his weight, he has body odour issues related to his fear of showering with boys. Weight has been associated with “abjection” and grotesque camp; that which is rejected to maintain order (Porter, 2011). Actor Harvey Guillen – and actors cast as Alistair’s family – are also Spanish American, in an environment where 80% of LGBT characters are white (GLAAD, 2011). Alistair’s body is unusual, in a number of ways, for a regular on network television.

Alistair also flirts with gender variance, and can be read as genderqueer. At a basic level, the character does not fit into masculine gender norms. In one scene early on, Alistair complains that his parents brought him a (masculine) GI Joe, rather than the (feminine) Sky Dancer Dolls they brought for his sister – and concludes, “It’s like they bought a present for the person they wish you were.” Beyond not fitting masculine norms, Alistair shows an attraction to female identification and feminine presentation. His attraction to Trent is first indicated, through a longing gaze, while Trent is dressed in drag. Later when he must choose a new name as part of Spirit Quest, (an appropriated Native American rite of passage) he chooses ‘Athena.’ Throughout the show from then on, he responds variously to both names, taking particular satisfaction from Trent using the name Athena. The character’s apparent shifts between identification as ‘Alistair’ and ‘Athena’ could be interpreted multiple ways, but it’s not hard to see it as gender fluidity, defined as “moving between two or more genders” (Roxie, 2011). This is one form of genderqueer identity (ibid). Genderqueer people, those who do not identify solely with one gender, face even greater discrimination than binary trans folk (Grant et al, 2011). Research shows that gender non-conforming youth in the US are widely targeted for abuse (Roberts et al, 2012). Alistair could be understood as a rare point of identification for gender variant youth, in a TV environment where transgender characters are virtually nonexistent (GLAAD, 2011).

In its most overt portrayals of teenage sexuality and hedonism, the show tactically mediates between normativity and complication. The Birthdays episode, with its

underage drinking and same-sex kisses, has to be careful to stay network-friendly. Dooley and Holzman talk in the commentary about how network regulations forced them to be creative in their portrayal of teenage drinking. Arguably the same-sex kisses are managed in a similarly tactical way, with the network in mind. For the first same-sex kiss, two popular girls; Chloe and Amber; kiss as a drunken dare. Many have noted how “girl on girl” kisses are often constructed cynically for the male gaze, as the most marketable form of same-sexuality (Wolfe, Roripaugh 2006; Kinsel, 2010b). In this case, following convention, the show cuts away to male reaction shots, explicitly affirming the male gaze. So the first same-sex kiss in the show is fairly normative for network TV. This paves the way for the second kiss: Chloe dares Dante to kiss another boy. However in this case, the dare ends up as a prank on unsuspecting Alistair.

The boys' same-sex kiss is more complicated, particularly by Alistair's refusal and negotiation of norms. Commentators have noted how kisses between men are marginalised on network TV (Doty, 2010). When they are depicted, they are often safely passionless, (ibid) which also plays out in this case. Additionally the camera cuts away to a girl cupping her face in shock, reinforcing that these kisses are performed for a heteronormative gaze, not for homosexual pleasure. However, Alistair complicates this dynamic. Before the kiss, he is trying to explain that he doesn't identify as gay or straight. After Dante kisses him, Alistair apologetically responds: “I like someone else.” For a moment Dante loses the upper hand: not only is Alistair refusing the schoolyard interpellation that “the gay kid” will happily kiss any boy, he also assumes Dante is experiencing unrequited attraction to him. Somewhat weakly, Dante responds: “It was a joke, dude,” and the other bullies emerge from their hiding place laughing and jeering. Pained music and reaction shots of Chloe, Alistair, and Trent indicate that this kiss is problematic.

The fallout from this party gone wrong deepens the themes of bodily insecurity, and negotiations of gender and sexuality. Birthdays is actor Harvey Guillen's favourite episode, and is a turning point for his character Alistair (TheTVChick, 2010).

It's significant that Chloe and Alistair, who are twins, perform the two problematic same-sex kisses. The identification between the twins is fraught with anxieties around relational existence and bodily autonomy. Butler (2004) argues that “part of understanding the oppression of lives is precisely to understand that there is no way to argue away [the] condition of a primary vulnerability,” (ibid) meaning partly that we are all connected by our vulnerability as bodies, people who were born; our necessary relational existence prevents total bodily autonomy. Alistair and Chloe's most emotionally charged confrontation occurs on their birthday, an indication of primary shared vulnerability; “[birth is] the vulnerability that precedes the formation of the ‘I’” (ibid). Up to this episode, Chloe is ashamed of Alistair and keeps it a secret that they are twins, but she tries to prevent the prank and breaks down when it is enacted. The betrayal in this scene breaks previous notions of kinship. The scene narrows on a series of close-ups of Alistair and Chloe as they meet each other's gaze. Alistair places his hand on his mouth as if feeling for a lost limb: this is his first kiss, and both his sense of relational existence (kinship) and bodily autonomy have been violated. One blogger described Alistair's expression as “surprisingly dark” in this scene, (Lesley, 2010b) because previously the character was emotionally positive and open towards Chloe. When Alistair turns away, their relational existence is denied. Alistair reminds Chloe of her vulnerability, of the impossibility of total autonomy: after witnessing the prank, she cries to Trent, “[as a twin] you have to share everything.” Similarly, prankster Dante acts as a reminder to Alistair of his surrendered bodily autonomy, his mistaken first kiss. Alistair treats Dante with disdain for the remaining episodes. When Dante tries to make amends by using the name Athena, Alistair responds “yeah, don't call me that.” Given that Alistair otherwise appreciates the name Athena, this is more a specific refusal of Dante's interpellation; he refuses bullying, by refusing labels and categories. Dante took away his bodily autonomy, so Alistair cuts off relational existence to preserve his dignity.

Alistair also asserts a positive sense of identification and relational existence. In the



ABC Family's *Huge* was cancelled after one season

closing scene of *Birthdays* Alistair expresses desire for Trent – who was the first to respect his identification as Athena, and who has tried to support him. Alistair's love becomes more conditional, toughening towards Chloe and Dante. Butler (1997) argues that the constitution of a queer subject is interpellated by abuse. In the wake of trauma, Alistair seeks to assert himself anew. His closing scenes in the finale consist of making and publicly wearing a new outfit; he cuts his neckline wider and wears a necklace. Both items come from women – the neckline idea borrowed from lead character Will, and the necklace from a visiting mother who loses it in the male bunk-room. Through these borrowed items his production of himself is strongly relational, particularly identified with women. However Alistair never explicitly “comes out” with a fixed identity. Alistair is not necessarily a woman misidentified as a man, or necessarily a man attracted to men – this teenager is still negotiating interpellations of gender and sexuality.

The cancellation of *Huge* underlines the limitations of commercial production as a basis for queer expression. Doty (2011) notes the normative way same-sex relations are portrayed in major network shows such as *Modern Family*, with the “good gays” aspiring to a monogamous nuclear family (ibid). This limitation was expressed more bluntly when out gay pop star Adam Lambert performed a kinky rendition of *For Your Entertainment*, and along with advertisers pulling out, gay marriage activist Jennifer Vanasco rebuked Lambert for not affirming the image of “[good gays] who have families and jobs and bills and weddings” (Brady, 2011).

Marcuse's notion of “repressive tolerance” may have some relevance here; diversity and even some dissent are tolerated, within the “range and limits” of the prevailing society; (Marcuse, 1965) in the case of network TV, the limits of exchange value. Alistair's mind and body fall outside these limits. While *Huge* was not cancelled because of its depiction of gender and sexuality, it was cancelled because its depiction of gender and sexuality was not sufficiently marketable.

Huge has a contradictory relationship with the norms of network television. Its existence was enabled by the sale and rebranding of the “Family Channel,” from an arm of a nominally non-profit Christian media empire, to an explicitly for-profit network seeking younger audiences. ABC Family's demand for new new audiences opened up possibilities for previously marginalised bodies, in terms of fat, gender and sexuality. The show internalises contradictions between queer exploration and the norms of network television, with “gay character” Alistair refusing and negotiating interpellation. Finally, the cancellation of *Huge* reinforces network norms; queer expression is limited to its acquisition of exchange value.

[1] For this essay I will refer to the character as Alistair and use male pronouns, as that is his primary identification in the narrative. An argument could be made for naming the character “Athena” with female or gender-neutral pronouns.

[2] Holzman also produced and wrote acclaimed, queer-friendly teen show *My So-Called Life*.

